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Romantic Discord

British Romanticism and Political Ideology

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Abstract: The Romantic Movement was a cultural movement that changed the literary and political landscape of Great Britain in the early 19th century. However, the political inclinations and implications of British Romantic writers are difficult to discern and Romantics could be found in almost every political faction of the time. This study provides a historical background to the Romantic literary movement and it categorises the political tendencies of Romanticism according to political ideology using examples from some of the most prominent English Romantic writers.

Keywords: Romanticism, ideology, political theory, intellectual history, romantic poetry

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Significance of Romanticism and Political Theory

Why study the political tendencies of the British Romantic literary movement? Besides the fascinating subject matter itself, there are several reasons that make it academically worthwhile to research the Romantic Movement from a political perspective. Occasionally, political theorists and intellectual historians choose to study literary figures, rather than philosophers or theorists, in order to better understand the development of European ideas and politics. Usually economic, military or political events are the main focus of political theory, but some scholars maintain that greater emphasis should be placed on language and symbols (Hamilton 3). George Orwell argued that literature is important for political theory because language is how we understand and give meaning to the world; literary work not only reflects, but shapes our perception of society (10). In many ways the Romantic period was a defining moment in the European history of both politics and literature. The contemporary satirist Thomas James Mathias wrote: "Literature, well or ill conducted, is the great engine by which... all civilized states must ultimately be supported or overthrown" (177).

Accordingly, the reader should bear in mind that although we are concerned with a cultural phenomenon, I intend to show the political inclinations and implications of British Romanticism. Both British Romanticism and political theory are well-established fields of study, but a categorisation of romantic writers according to their ideological preferences has, to the best of my knowledge, not been undertaken. What this study may lack in originality it will hopefully make up for in synthesis. This essay will demonstrate how and why the Romantics had such widely different opinions regarding politics by studying some of the most influential writers of the time. My intention is to show the entire political spectrum of the Romantic Movement, consequently this study focuses primarily on a few prominent British writers that will serve as examples of different political affiliations. By comparing them to contemporary political figures I discern similarities and eventual influences. I should emphasise that the Romantic poets are a rather difficult group to define politically, perhaps because the movement was based upon sentiment and sensibility, they were notoriously inconsistent and sometimes even paradoxical in their views (Brewer 21). Therefore, I cannot claim to provide a definite categorisation of the Romantic poets, but rather a way of interpreting their tendencies.

When discerning the political inclinations and influences of British Romantic writers, I will do so in regard to political ideologies and, to accomplish this, I will employ the theories and definitions used by Terrance Ball and Richard Dagger. Ideology is a term that has many meanings; however, in this case, it simply refers to ideology as a system of beliefs. The term ideology was coined during the time of the French revolution, which makes it an especially relevant concept for this study. Ball and Dagger define ideology as: "[…] a fairly coherent and comprehensive set of ideas that explains and evaluates social conditions, helps people understand their place in society, and provides a program for social and political action" (Ball and Dagger 4).

To be deemed a proper political ideology, such as liberalism or conservatism, an ideology needs to fulfil certain criteria: an ideology needs to explain why society is the way it is and describe the causes behind social, economic and political conditions. Another function of ideology is to evaluate society and determine what is good and bad for its citizens, if the citizens' welfare is even a concern or who is to be considered a citizen. Most people struggle with questions of who they are and what their place in society is; ideology provides its followers with a way to orientate themselves within society and gives them a sense of identity. An ideology needs to propose a specific program of political actions that details what should be done, or not done, in order to improve society (Ball and Dagger 5-7).

To elaborate on Ball's and Dagger's definition, not all political philosophies should be considered ideologies. Even great political theories, like those in Plato's *Republic* or Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, should not be considered ideologies if they do not provide an adequate worldview and, even if influential, never stir great masses of people. Neither are all -isms ideologies. Pacifism, populism and terrorism are political methods, while Darwinism and empiricism are scientific theories. Democracy on the other hand is a form of government and a set of principles, which means that it can be combined with ideologies; someone could be a Socialist Democrat, but probably not a Socialist Conservative. Concerning religions and such systems of belief, they may sometimes be seen as political ideologies, however strictly political ideologies do not involve questions of spirituality or the afterlife and they are, therefore, excluded from my study. How all of this relates to British Romanticism will be explored further, later on in the essay.

1.2 Defining Romanticism

Before analysing specific tendencies of British Romanticism, a brief overview and definition of Romanticism could be beneficial. It is always difficult to pinpoint the beginning of a literary period and even harder to define it. However, in regard to the Romantic Movement, it is possible to do so since Romanticism was such a distinctive genre of literature. Some scholars attribute the rise of Romanticism to the ideas and work of the French intellectual Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his publication of *Les Confessions* 1782. Rousseau's unapologetic assertion that someone's personal life and ideas could be worthy of art sets the tone for Romantic writers to come. Early English satirists also deserve some acknowledgment (Hamilton 5). The *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, outlines the Romantic period from 1789 to 1832; starting with the French revolution and ending with the first British Reform Bill (10). Compared to other chapters in literary history this was a short, yet very influential and unique period. Interestingly enough, the Romantics did not consider themselves part of any joint movement; the fact that romanticism was a divided school of thought becomes especially apparent when studying it in regards to political theory. The term 'Romantics' was applied later on by the Victorians and it is somewhat peculiar that the Romantic Movement became prevalent in England since the country had few substantial ties to classical culture. Nevertheless, the romantic writers appreciated classical and, perhaps even more so, medieval culture. The medieval romances had up until that time been overlooked by literary historians as flagrant fantasies, but the Romantics could relate to the wild-versed narratives of valour, love and adventure. Thus, they often drew upon local tales and folklore in their work; many Romantics also had a fondness for the occult and supernatural. The Romantic writers generally appreciated anything that was strange or exotic, whether it be the gothic scenery of Coleridge, Byron's pirates or Blake's tiger (Greenblatt 4, 11).

The social situation of artists, literary figures included, changed drastically during this period. Previously most intellectual writers had been working for the establishment and were often dependant on patronage from the aristocracy in one form or another, but now a new sort of writer emerged. The Romantic poet was a man of the people, rather than part of any elite, but his sensitivity, or sensibility, was greater than that of ordinary men. The Romantics identified with the concept of the 'romantic hero'; a visionary rebel who, in one way or another, was unable to live with society's restrictions and thus fled to the solace of nature. Studying literary history from an epistemological perspective, we can determine that 18th

century British writers had been pragmatic poets, primarily interested in the relation between the poem and the audience. Romantic poetry, however, was expressionist, meaning the poet was in the centre of poetry and it was the poet's personal perception that was considered essential. It was not only the poet's reflection of nature, for example, but the poet's own perception that mattered. The Romantic poet was more concerned with imagination than reason and the Romantics would focus on synthesis rather than on analysis (Greenblatt 10-3).

The depiction of nature was a significant element of Romanticism; however, their view of nature differed from earlier poets like Dryden or Pope. The Romantics dismissed the 'Newtonian' view of nature as orderly and domesticated by man. They preferred dramatic, untamed nature which would invoke intense emotions of dread, anxiety and awe. Feelings the romantics contemplated to a great extent, especially when confronting the 'sublime' (Greenblatt 14-5). Edmund Burke defined the sublime in his work *A Philosophical Inquiry In to the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759) and while he describes the beautiful as something delightful, the sublime is intense and awe inspiring, but not truly frightful. The Romantics could be very spiritual at times, but not in the traditional sense; they much more preferred mysticism and pantheism.

1.3 Selection of Romantic Writers

When studying the ideological tendencies of Romanticism, I intend to reflect on the entire spectrum of political predispositions; therefore, I have selected five prominent writers that will serve as primary examples and represent the ideologies that I contrast. Nicholas Riasanovsky refers to William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge as the two leading authors that helped launch the Romantic Movement. In 1797 they published *Lyrical Ballads* together and, although not an instant success, Riasanovsky argues, that it was a momentous work which changed British literature and poetry drastically. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads,* from 1798 Wordsworth outlines his understanding of poetry and explains why he chose to write about rustic scenery and ordinary people. Previously these had only been the subject of comedies, but Wordsworth gave them a new remarkable quality. Whereas Enlightenment writers tried to remove the veil of mystery, Wordsworth tried to remove the veil of familiarity, thus making us see things as they truly are despite their mundaneness (15-20).

Wordsworth's companion Coleridge had the same visionary view of poetry, but he went in a different direction. Riasanovsky considers Coleridge a very learned poet and he has often

been credited as the one who brought German philosophy to the English. Whereas Wordsworth made the ordinary extraordinary, Coleridge would make the supernatural natural. In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), an autobiography, he explains how to create "a willing suspension of disbelief" (26): as long as the characters' emotional reactions are convincing to the reader then he or she is willing to overlook the supernatural elements. Imagination was important to Coleridge, he thought that everyone has the 'primary imagination' necessary to receive and reflect the external world. But some, namely the artists, possessed a 'secondary imagination' that could expand upon the primary imagination; this, however, requires a conscious effort. Coleridge also explored the notion of transcendence, which is a rather complex idea about changing the subject's imaginations into an object. The transcendental poet could, with the help of divine inspiration, 'reincarnate', or embody, eternal truth into poetry. Not all poets were able to complete this journey as Coleridge expressed it, so exceptional poets deserved the utmost appreciation. Wordsworth and Coleridge eventually had a falling out, partly because of political and philosophical differences (37-9).

William Blake was never directly part of any movement, but he influenced other romantics and eventually became a prominent English writer. He showed artistic talent at an early age and became an engraver, which is how he came into contact with the gothic art of Westminster Abbey. Many literary critics argue that his illustrations are just as important as his prose and should not be neglected when evaluating his work. As mentioned earlier, the Romantics were fascinated with perception and this was prevalent in Blake's writing. In one of his most famous works the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), later with the added title "*The Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*", he shows how the same situation can be perceived very differently. An example of this would be the identically named poems "The Chimney Sweeper" where the reader gets two perspectives; in one case, the innocence of the little children is emphasised, while the other only portrays misery and exploitation (Greenblatt 112-5).

The Romantic tradition continued with new contributions from Shelley and Byron, amongst others, who belong to the second generation of Romantic writers. Percy B. Shelley developed the Romantic ideas and captured them very well in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821) and although written in prose it is close to poetry at times. Shelley strongly privileges imagination over reason and he makes it an almost philosophical discussion; while men of science break things down into parts to see the differences, the poet synthesises and makes everything whole. Advocates of reason claim that research and analysis lead to the ultimate

truth, but, with Shelley's argument, one can say that science has changed opinion countless times and old scientific theories seem ridiculous, while classical poetry still holds true even to our day. So in a sense, if truth means eternal then poetry is truer than science. Shelley goes far indeed in his praise of the poet claiming that poetry shapes and colours our existence, helps us perceive value and discover and create similitude. Shelley wrote that inspiration was like a wind blowing over the poet that makes him create; this passiveness has often been interpreted as feminine and the Romantics often admired traditionally feminine attributes. The degree of activity from the poets' part was cause of much debate amongst Romantics. Shelley thought passivity was inevitable and that the unpredictability of inspiration leads to angst. But, when inspired, the poet was like an exalted prophet and a conduit of the divine. The poet seeks beauty and truth and if it is not there he creates it. Percy Shelley eventually married Mary Godwin, who also became a prominent Romantic writer herself.

George Gordon Byron, better known as Lord Byron was a very eccentric individual even amongst such spectacular writers as the Romantics. Bertrand Russell argues that Byron's influence has been greater than it first seemed, because, even though he did not become very popular in England during his lifetime, his thoughts were widely recognised in continental Europe. Byron had a tumultuous childhood and his early years involved many scandalous love affairs. A sudden inheritance meant that he became a Lord and he went on living as an aristocratic rebel of sorts. He was considered an upstart by nobility, yet he took pride in his legacy and he admired his crusader ancestors. Unlike someone who rebel out of necessity, the aristocratic rebels needs other motives and his circumstances must be peculiar, which Byron's most certainly were. Not quite a literary critic like other remarkable Romantic writers, Byron's lifestyle inspired a new type of 'Romantic hero' and his nihilistic nature was appreciated by a certain faction of the Romantic Movement (Greenblatt 671).

These authors and their work will serve as primary examples in my study because of their literary prominence and general influence on Romanticism. There are of course many more writers worth mentioning and even more to be said about these extraordinary poets but that is not the main focus of this particular essay.

1.4 The Political Context of British Romanticism

To make it easier for the reader to comprehend the context of this study, I will provide a short background of important political events and circumstances in the Romantic period. The Romantic period of the late 18th to mid19th century was characterised by social and political

upheavals in Europe. It is often described as a turbulent time in British history and the revolutionary fervour that had started the American Revolution in 1775 escalated even further when the Bastille was stormed in July 1789, signalling the beginning of the French Revolution. According to David Simpson, English radicals, amongst them many Romantics, were exceedingly inspired by this turn of events and political affairs took over the public debate. This meant that writers had to take a stand on issues of state and literary work took on new political dimensions. In this time, politics and literature were so intertwined that the line between fiction and reality became blurred and the complex relation between art and activism was established. When the French people broke loose from their chains, it led to the realisation that people's inner dreams could be projected unto the outside world, which in itself was a highly romantic idea (Simpson 49).

For a time, France became the frontline in the struggle between the old feudalist system and the new democratic ideals. Since the Romantics always had a considerable sentiment towards revolution and strong, uninformed emotions, it is not strange that they supported the revolt against privilege, tradition and authority. As the power of the old regime and church were toppled the revolutionaries became almost delirious with enthusiasm and it inspired liberals and democrats all over Europe. Yet the French republic soon deteriorated into the horrific reign of terror and all but the most extreme radicals were disillusioned, the English poets included (Hancock 3-5). Under the threat of a foreign reactionary coalition the French people turned to Napoleon and once again there was tyranny in France. The political aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars was so timid and dull that it was unbearable for all but the most modest conservatives. However, the second generation of Romantics took upon themselves to break this silence and, when they did so, they were more ostentatious than ever. (Hancock 6-9)

Contrary to contemporary belief, the romantics had a strong sense of moral values, but these were very different from previous moral principles. In hindsight, the 19th century seems rational and progressive; however, not all people felt that way. The Romantics, amongst others, were highly critical of the Enlightenment. Romanticism is often portrayed as a radical break from the Enlightenment ideas of reason and rationality being the only or ultimate form of truth. However, Bertrand Russell points out that there are similarities between the two; just like their predecessors, the Romantics broke with social conventions and, above all, they valued individual liberty. Of course, as developed further in the next chapter, the Romantics' definition of freedom would vary significantly (Russell 575).

The arguably most significant change to occur in British history had taken place during the 18th century and the industrial revolution kept changing the landscape of England in the Romantic period. The city of London grew rapidly, from about three-quarters of a million residents in 1760 to a population of 1.4 million in 1815, the biggest proportional increase in London's history (Barrell 131-4). All over Britain urbanisation meant that the cities became overpopulated while rural communities were destroyed. John Barrell describes the tough life of urban working people, who had to deal with the new dilemmas of early industrial society; poor living and working conditions, minimal wages, at times mass unemployment, little or no social welfare, food shortages and plenty of vice such as gin and prostitution. The factories drove thousands of craftsmen out of work and riots took place frequently. Outraged crowds even attacked the factories, destroying essential equipment, and the Parliament responded by making the destruction of spinning engines a capital offence. In contrast to the Enlightenment philosophers, who had anticipated technological advancement to be positive for the progress of society, the Romantics were much more sceptical of how society developed. They despised industrialism because it was ugly and generally they admired the old pastoral England; the peasant was thought to be more virtuous than the factory labourer (Russell 583).

2. Romanticism According to Political Ideology

2.1 Liberalism – The Radical Coleridge

The Romantics rarely concerned themselves with issues of government and they usually considered business as vulgar moneygrubbing, but they were gradually led into politics by climactic events such as the French revolution, industrialisation and nationalism (Gallagher 71). When they addressed affairs of state they tended to be, as in most things, radical and guided by sentiment rather than reason; a romantic would be sympathetic towards a poor peasant family, but indifferent to a plan that could improve the conditions for the agrarian class as a whole (Russell 607). The political background of the British Romantics derived from the intellectual tradition of Locke, Hume and Smith who had very persuasively advocated the removal of legal and social barriers to allow the individual to pursue whatever life he or she chooses (Ball 45). All genuine Romantic writers would first and foremost champion individual liberty so it is not surprising that many romantics were inspired by early liberalism- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, provides an excellent example of why and how British romanticism relates to liberal ideas of equality, liberty and human rights. Although the Romantics rejected Enlightenment rationality and the perceived rules of nature, they still considered liberty, especially creative freedom, a virtue (Hancock 7). It can be discerned how this promotion of self-interest would appeal to Romantics who often felt at odds with social conventions and, like the hero in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", struggled with issues of alienation and stigmatisation because they strived for glory and recognition.

In his youth, Coleridge considered himself a radical liberal and, with likeminded people, he maintained plans of founding a free democratic community in America based on "pantisocracy", meaning equal rule for all. The community schemes were never successful and Coleridge's radicalism would later diminish, but, throughout his life, he would remain a supporter of the Whigs party, the liberal party in British Parliament at the time (Greenblatt 436-9). In 1798, Coleridge published the satirical poem "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter: A War Eclogue" in *The Morning Post*. In this satire, he expresses much contempt for Prime Minister William Pitt and his support for royalists in France which led to the massacre of revolutionaries in the town of Vendée: "SLAUGHTER: Four letters form his name./ And who sent you? FAMINE: The same! the same! SLAUGHTER: He came by stealth and unlock'd my den,/ And I have drank the blood since then/ Of thrice ten hundred thousand men" (19-

24). The political tension intensified in Britain during this period and trials of treason were held on the basis of 'imagining the King's death in print'. Pitt's government used this supposedly regicidal imagery to pass further repressive legislation, including the suspension of Habeas Corpus and the Seditious Meetings and Treasonable Practices Act, but, in the meanwhile, liberals in Parliament pressed for reform and the regime in France changed from a constitutional monarchy to a republic (Janowitz 361). Many English intellectuals would go to France and report on the early stages of the revolution. Coleridge was one of them and he, like most Romantics at the time, expressed great hopes for the 'glorious revolution'. The fall of the Bastille would in England, and the rest of Europe, symbolise the demise of the unjust French legal system. However, after the initial triumph, most English Romantics eventually found themselves disillusioned by the revolution, albeit after the execution of the king, the Reign of Terror, the invasion of Switzerland or the rise of Napoleon (Simpson 50).

A considerable amount of literature was published by Coleridge and in his poems, essays and letters he shows his liberal inclinations. In his poem from 1798, "France: an Ode", Coleridge provides one of the most vivid depictions of the French revolution from a liberal's outlook. The first stanza expresses Coleridge's appreciation of wild and free nature and he argues that this is the way the world is supposed to be: "Yea, every thing that is and will be free!/ Bear witness for me, wheresoe'er ye be,/ With what deep worship I have still adored,/ The spirit of divinest Liberty" (18-21). As mentioned previously, Coleridge grieved for Britain's involvement in the coalition against France: "The Monarchs marched in evil day,/ And Britain joined the dire array;/ Though dear her shores and circling ocean,/ Though many friendships,/ many youthful loves,/ Had swoln the patriot emotion" (30-34), "… But blessed the paeans of delivered France,/ And hung my head and wept at Britain's name" (41-42). Coleridge then considers the Reign of Terror and thinks it gruesome, but 'necessary' all the same (Ashton 133): "Domestic treason, crushed beneath her [France] fatal stamp,/ Writhed like a wounded dragon in his gore,/ Then I reproached my fears that would not flee;/ "And soon," I said, "shall Wisdom teach her lore" (56-59). Finally, he describes the betrayal and guilt he felt when the French army became the aggressors and invaded Switzerland: "To scatter rage, and traitorous guilt,/ Where Peace her jealous home had built;/ A patriot-race to disinherit" (72-74), "… To taint the bloodless freedom of the mountaineer—,/ O France, that mockest Heaven, adulterous, blind,/ And patriot only in pernicious toils!" (77-78). Besides the disastrous developments of the French Revolution, we might in conclusion say that unlike Wordsworth, who found any disturbance of the established order troubling, Coleridge's

critique of the Revolution in *Conciones ad populum. Or, Addresses to the people* from 1795 is actually based on the *philosophes'* forceful attempts to systematically apply strict rules to society and their inability to see the limits of reason, which makes sense considering Coleridge's liberal and romantic predisposition (Simpson 68). Even though Coleridge's radicalism would decline significantly, it can still be argued that the political outcome of his literary work was to influence and promote liberalism more than anything else: 'Once a Jacobin, always a Jacobin', as he sarcastically stated in an essay with the same title in a response to accusations of radicalism 1805.

The studies of Catherine Gallagher indicate that some of the first generation of Romantics, particularly the 'lake poets' including Samuel Coleridge and Robert Southey, the owner of the liberal newspaper T*he Examiner*, had liberal preferences and the theories of the political economists, usually considered proponents of free-trade and capitalism, were readily embraced amongst some of those poets (Gallagher 71-4). For example, in 1800, Coleridge published a letter in *the Morning Post* in which he agrees with Adam Smith's assessment that the grain market would find its own level and ought not to be tampered with. Likewise, both the classical economists, including Smith, Malthus, Ricardo and Mill, and the early Romantics regarded the behaviour and opinions of ordinary people, rather than the powerful few, to be the quintessential component of the nation and both thought individual free will, rather than edicts imposed by the state, was the source of social progress. Both groups also sought to release the productive and creative forces currently impeded upon by repressive laws, censorship, heavy taxation and other forms of state restrictions (72). I think it is reasonable to assume that, since the political economists had such a considerable influence on the intellectual debate, the Romantics would embrace their ideas to a certain degree. Thomas De Quincy was someone who actually bridged the two groups, being both a romantic poet and a classical economist. To the distinctly liberal-minded Romantics we might also count the 'Cockney school'. Leigh Hunt, editor of several publications, including *The Liberal* in 1822, John Keats and William Hazlitt (Cox 22-23).

It is worth remarking that most of the prominent Romantics took a strong stance against slavery and that this conceivably contributed to the implementation of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833; it can be argued that this is not a sign of liberal inclinations and that Christians, conservatives or socialists would have done the same, as with condemning despotism and feudal monarchy, but the way Coleridge proposed to end the slave trade is particularly fascinating from the perspective of political theory. Unsurprisingly, Coleridge regarded the

slave trade as contemptible and in his 1795 lecture on slavery, reworked and published in *The Watchman* 1796, he urged his fellow Christians to abstain from sugar and rum, asserting that such delicacies were 'sweetened with human blood'. However, he did not suggest that it should be forbidden by legislation like most opponents of slavery. Instead, Coleridge reasoned: "[what is] That cause, by which it [slavery] exists and deprived of which it would immediately cease? Is it not self-evidently the consumption of its products? And does not the guilt rest on the consumers?". This argumentation is very reminiscent of libertarian thought and it implies, as previously stated, that some Romantics not only appreciated, but had a great deal of confidence in the free-market and individual choice (Greenblatt 108-10).

It is difficult to determine how romanticism affected liberalism, because there seems to have been a mutual exchange of ideas between the two movements and, to further complicate matters, the Romantics' attitude towards liberalism was certainly ambivalent. The initial impression is that the Romantic writers perceived liberalism critically; it was too materialistic and legal. Both social and personal life were measured and regulated like industry to meet expectations; people were regarded as legal persons with rights and responsibilities and the individual was intended to make only rational choices as a consumer (Rosenblum 2-5). Such a cold, calculated outlook on life was unbearable for the Romantics, but, as this study attests, they greatly desired and admired liberty. I think traces of romanticism can be found in the political philosophy of utilitarianism, an offspring of early liberalism which argued that decisions should promote the greatest amount of utility — utility being measured in the well-being and reduction of suffering among people. Although still based on rationality, Romantics may have furthered this way of thinking because they, like utalitarians, promoted strong moral sentiments, self-interest and a great extent of democratic liberty that allowed for creativity and deviation (Ball 64-8). John Stuart Mill, a prominent liberal theorist who held Coleridge in the highest regard, affirms this theory in some measure. In 1840, Mill published an essay dedicated to Coleridge claiming that Coleridge along with Jeremy Bentham, a renowned utilitarian, were the 'great questioners of all things established' and that he had exerted influence far beyond his admirers (Mill 119).

2.2 Conservatism – Wordsworth's Disillusionment

Having shown the liberal tendencies amongst the British Romantic writers, it may seem peculiar to suggest that there are reactionary elements in Romanticism, but, as I intend to

show, there are and some Romantic writers, like Burke and Wordsworth, emphasise their conservative values, which is why Romanticism is often considered as such a politically divided movement. “Perilous is sweeping change, all chance unsound” (14), wrote William Wordsworth in his *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty and Order* 1838. Like all Romantics, Wordsworth valued imagination and sensitivity, but Wordsworth was much more conventional than his colleague Coleridge, a poet rather than a critic and an advocate of harmony loyal to the establishment. The early works of Wordsworth almost exclusively involve nature and rustic scenery which is appropriate since he argued for a return to a tranquil existence of rural living and poetry (Trott 72).

Romanticism and conservatism began as reactionary movements, disputing the Enlightenment and liberalism respectively, and both groups found inspiration from the moral philosopher and politician Edmund Burke. Burke might have been considered a Romantic himself, but generally his way of thinking belonged in the 18th century and his pursuits were mainly political and philosophical. However, one of Burke’s most significant contributions, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1757, involves both literature and politics (Bromwich 113). Although it is a treatise of aesthetics, there are certain political insinuations to be derived from it and Burke’s arguments resonate in Wordsworth’s appraisal of poetry. According to Burke’s epistemological outlook, things are not beautiful in themselves; it is our perception of something that makes it beautiful (Adams and Searle 340). Since almost everyone has the senses to perceive then they can make reasonable judgements regarding anything, like poetry, philosophy or politics. At the time, it was a rather democratic notion that people were capable of making judgements as long as their senses were not impaired, but, paradoxically, Burke remarks that there is such a thing as ‘taste’ and people can have either good, bad or perhaps no taste at all; it takes refinement before someone can distinguish between what is beautiful or sublime and what is not (334-5). Burke’s reasoning thus conveys both democratic and elitist meanings. Finally Burke expresses his preference for the sublime over the beautiful, thereby indicating a transition from neoclassicism to romanticism. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth picks up on Burke’s ideas, claiming that poetry should be based on ‘the real language of men’ and Wordsworth also wanted ‘middle and lower classes’ to partake in the pleasures of poetry (Greenblatt 292). However, rather than simply praising ‘the common man’ he wanted to elevate people so that they became more sophisticated and cultured. Wordsworth’s efforts to revitalise British poetry were noble and his sentiments good, but, when Wordsworth, like

Burke, praises aristocratic manners and taste there seems to be a certain disregard towards ordinary people and, in the end, he belittles the very people he tries to encourage.

Whereas many English liberals were disillusioned by the aftermath of the French revolution, the followers of Edmund Burke had their suspicions reaffirmed. Initially, Burke thought that the 'sublime spectacle' was 'impossible not to admire', he had after all been a supporter of American independence and had opposed the war in the House of Commons (Bromwich 113). But Burke saw considerable differences between the two uprisings and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* published in 1790 describes his observations and scepticism. To comprehend Burke's criticism and how it appealed to certain romantic writers requires some understanding of Burke's worldview and ideal form of government. Burke thought people's inherent rights should always be accorded and social reform should be gradual and constitutional. He also advocated a mixed constitutional monarchy consisting of three components: a republican part, the assembly, should have the dominant part, but be held in check by a democratic part that represents the people and a monarchical part in the form of a king. This was, according to Burke, the most enlightened form of government possible for man (Bromwich 114). Abstractions of concepts like liberty or equality, like those in *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, could be abused to justify tyranny. Burke, who thought the French were 'unfit for liberty' since they were an unruly and unconstrained people who needed to be coerced by a strong leader, saw this happen as the Revolution deteriorated into what Burke and other conservatives considered 'mob-rule, atheism and anarchy' (Shaw 50). In opposition to this, Burke thought that the British had civilizing attributes like tolerance and moderation and also valued 'the crown, church and constitution' which have been fundamental symbols for British conservatism ever since.

Wordsworth's response to the Revolution was not quite so dogmatic. The appropriately titled poem "The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement" published 1809 expresses Wordsworth's hopes and utter disappointment in what he thought was the beginning of universal liberty and happiness (Duff 51). Wordsworth had the same initial admiration as Burke and Coleridge: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/ But to be young was very Heaven!/ O times, In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways/ Of custom, law, and statute, took at once/ The attraction of a country in romance!" (4-8). Unlike Burke who at every given chance portrays the revolution as inherently evil, Wordsworth was more hesitant and maintains that his excitement was 'natural' and well-intended: "The budding rose above the rose full blown./ What temper at the prospect did not wake/ To happiness unthought

of? The inert/ Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!" (17-20). In the vast work that is Wordsworth's autobiographical *Prelude* (1850) we get another example of Wordsworth's disenchantment: "But now, become oppressors in their turn,/ Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence/ For one of conquest, losing sight of all/ Which they had struggled for". (Book Eleventh, *France*, lines 206-8).

Wordsworth's poem "Blest Statesman He, whose Mind's unselfish will", part of *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), is evidently inspired by conservative principles. In the "Speech to the Electors of Bristol" from 1774 Burke described his ideal representative (Ball and Dagger 94):

> Their [the constituency's] wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions in high respect; their business unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions, to theirs- and above all… to prefer their interest to his own.
>
> But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice.

These ideas closely resemble the politician in Wordsworth's poem: "Blest Statesman He, whose Mind's unselfish will/ Leaves him at ease among grand thoughts: whose eye/ Sees that, apart from magnanimity,/ Wisdom exists not; nor the humbler skill/ Of Prudence, disentangling good and ill/ With patient care" (1-6). Wordsworth's praise of humility, moderation and duty shows his proneness to conservatism: "Resolute, at all hazards, to fulfil/ Its duties;--prompt to move, but firm to wait,--/ Knowing, things rashly sought are rarely found" (8-10).

The 'Revolution Controversy' as it became known sparked an intense debate in Britain when people like William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams and Thomas Paine responded to Burke's assessment of the situation in France. The newspapers and periodic publications, still a relatively new phenomenon in the 1790s, were the public arena where the intellectual debate of the time took place and it was a time when literary artists and political theorists intermingled (Strachan 191). Generally, the popular publications tended to be liberal; either radical and pro-French, like the *Analytical* and the *Critical*, or pro-reform and 'Whiggish', like the *Monthly* and the *Morning Chronicle*. This was worrying for William Pitt who led the Tory government and endeavoured to engage in war with France. Tories and other conservatives saw growing radicalism in England as troubling and to combat the liberal propaganda several loyalist publications were launched and sponsored by the government, the *British Critic* had for some time vehemently condemned radicalism and Whig-policies, but to little avail, nor had *The True Briton* or *The Sun* any better success (191).

The most ardently conservative of the reactionary publications was the *Antijacobin* whose purpose it was to expose the 'mistakes, misrepresentations and lies of anti-governmental writing', 'be it journalistic, philosophical or poetical' (192-3). The first number issued makes their position very clear:

> […] JACOBINISM in all its shapes, and in all its degrees, political and moral, public and private, whether as it openly threatens the subversion of States, or gradually saps the foundations of domestic happiness, We are the avowed, determined, and irreconcileable enemies.

According to John Strachan the *Antijacobin* would have had a negligible importance if it were not for the innovative poetry featured in the publication (193). Although mostly satire, there were also patriotic verse, comparable to modern right-wing rhetoric, like Hely Addington's "The invasion; or , the British War song": "let France in savage accents sing,/ Her bloody Revolution;/ we prize our country, love our King,/ Adore our constitution" (193). Some comparisons can be made between the antijacobin rhetoric and the anticommunism typical of conservatism in the 20th century. Conservatives and radical egalitarians have always been incompatible enemies, according to Ball and Dagger, because conservatives view human nature as inherently flawed and thus the source of social problems, whereas egalitarians see social conditions, particularly inequalities, as the cause of social dilemmas. Conservatives, therefore, cannot tolerate the Jacobean, liberal nor socialist ideas because they all place unwarranted faith in progress, while disregarding tradition and human nature (Ball and Dagger 104-5).

In their search for inspiration outside of their own period, the Romantics turned to the medieval romances, but whereas many Romantics choose medieval or gothic themes for their narratives (Fey 8), some would even derive certain political implications from the medieval. Edmund Burke would frequently, in a style very similar to that of the Romantic writers, admire the ideals of the 'Age of Chivalry' as an alternative to the radical ideals of the French Revolution. When Burke, in *Reflections*, mourned for the lost aristocratic values of feudal society, he actually revived them in a sense: "Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which is kept alive even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom" (Burke 169-70). Such idealistic notions led to plenty of satire, portraying him as the deranged knight *Don Quixote* (Duff 24). Wordsworth also appreciated chivalry; however, to Wordsworth, the French Revolution was not the end, but the dawn of a new sort of chivalry. Wordsworth had hoped that chivalry would no longer be a trait exclusive to the aristocracy or

the *ancien régime*, but rather anyone with a commitment to generosity, temperance and righteousness (Duff 37). In the Prelude he expresses these sentiments: "… unto the poor/ Among mankind, he was in service bound" (ix, 303-4), and to them he "Transferred a courtesy which had no air/ Of condescension, but did rather seem/ A passion and a gallantry" (ix, 308-10).

We are usually led to believe that conservatives are cautious, timid and reactionary in their endeavours; however, Burke disagreed and argued that action based on custom and previous knowledge is in fact the most spontaneous (Bromwich 116). As opposed to the idealism of 'the political men of letters' who only consider 'sheer utility', Burke maintains that virtuous men make decisions based on a mixture of opinion and sentiment with its roots in the ancient chivalry discussed earlier; when the mob stormed Versailles a thousand men should have leapt to Marie-Antoinette's rescue. In this sense we can find a degree of romanticism within conservatism, but it is a type of conservatism that is not very prevalent in modern day politics. One could argue that the Religious Right is a contemporary political faction that makes claims on the basis of sentiment, but I think the similarities are otherwise negligible. Wordsworth's blessed Statesman and his preference for harmony and order remains applicable, though this was hardly a new or romantic concept. I would also argue that the romantic expressions of the *Antijacobin* remain more or less the same in anti-progressive rhetoric today. To some extent, Romanticism influenced traditional conservatism, although that is a neglected school of thought, the popularity of which has declined considerably, gradually giving way to individual conservatism and neoconservatism (Ball and Dagger 105-6).

2.3 Socialism – Blake's Utopia

When discussing British Romanticism in regards to socialism we are primarily concerned with what might be called utopian socialism or proto-socialism, because since the term socialism had not yet been coined, nor had Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, it would evidently be wrong to suppose that any of the early Romantic writers considered themselves socialists. Nevertheless, certain aspects of Romanticism had much in common with early socialist ideas and some scholars even suggest the two movements partially merged once socialism had been established (Löwy and Sayre 18). When discerning socialist tendencies in British Romanticism, I will do so largely in regard to the poetry of William Blake. His critique of industrialism and visions of utopia suggest rather progressive preferences. Some literary critics would argue that Blake's poetry is merely spiritual in nature, but other scholars, including Nicholas Williams and Michael Ferber, maintain that Blake had an 'unusual sensitivity to his social context' which gives this interpretation certain merit (Williams 6-7).

Although not quite as prevalent as the radical-reactionary debate in England, there is still a history of discourse concerning property ownership, resource distribution and collective decision-making. For example in the fictional work *Utopia*, the 16th century humanist Thomas More claims that: "[W]herever men have private property and money is the measure of everything, it is hardly possible for the commonwealth to be governed justly or to flourish in prosperity" (Ball and Dagger 115). More argued that policies that encouraged competition for profit led to pride, greed and envy which was sinful; therefore, a communal subsistence would be preferable (Ball and Dagger 118). Around the 17th century several nonconformist groups emerged and founded communities based around the same principles as Thomas More's, for example, the 'True Levellers', more often called 'the Diggers', were a group of such protestant, egalitarian agrarians who sought to create equality based on passages in the Bible (32-3) . Other sources of early socialism in the early 19th century can be found on the European continent in the work of somewhat philanthropic thinkers like Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier (120-1). A considerable influence for the British utopian socialists of the early 19th century came from the industrialist Robert Owens and his pioneering work in the community of New Lanark, Scotland (Williams 170). In an experiment in social engineering, Owen organised his factory around co-operation and his progressive moral views. Prior to Owen's acquisition of New Lanark, the working environment had been unsatisfactory to say the least; the work hours were so dreary that only the destitute would endure such conditions.

Housing for the workers was poor, many families lived in a single room and education as well as sanitation were neglected and the labourers' recompense was meagre and often tinkered with (170-1). Owen successfully implemented several welfare programs that improved the workers' circumstances and the production considerably. Under these new arrangements the employed were free, even required, to voice any discontent, but few ever did so. Without Owen's guidance, the community eventually crumbled to commercial pressure from the outside and dissidence from the inside (173). Before the project came to an end it had caused much debate amongst the intellectuals of the time, including Romantics like Robert Southey and, of course, Blake.

Owen's management of New Lanark from 1800 to 1829 happened to coincide with Blake's work on *The New Jerusalem* which he produced between 1804 and 1820. This was perhaps a coincidence, but the two idealists nevertheless shared the same vision of a better society to come. However, while Owen sought to liberate the poor of England through socialism, Blake envisioned something more akin to millenarianism, a kind of spiritual transformation, that would change England for the better: "And did those feet in ancient time,/ Walk upon England's mountains green:/ And was the holy Lamb of God,/ On England's pleasant pastures seen!" (1-4). This well-known poem printed in 1804 is typical of Blake's mystical and prophetic style, yet not so cryptic as other work of his. Some argue that Blake's poetry contains much social idealism disguised as protestant allegory (Williams 178): "I will not cease from Mental Fight,/ Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:/ Till we have built Jerusalem,/ In England's green & pleasant Land" (13-16).

Another often debated stanza of the same poem reads: "And did the Countenance Divine,/ Shine forth upon our clouded hills?/ And was Jerusalem builded here,/ Among these dark Satanic Mills?" (5-8). The satanic mills are usually considered a reference to the steam powered mills that drove independent craftsmen out of work and into the hellish factories. The industrial revolution was well underway in Great Britain at the turn of the millennium, but, as described in the introduction, not all people felt that the current development was beneficial to themselves or even to society as a whole. Blake, and most of the Romantic writers with him, were amongst those that criticised industrialism. However, they did so for different reasons; some Romantics would pity the exploited and despair at the alienated people, some also mourned the loss of the 'ideal past' and yearned for pastoral England, whereas a few despised the mundaneness of industry and the ugliness of the cityscape (Russell 583).

As we have seen most of the Romantics assigned little value to tradition or customs, they much preferred to go against the established norms, especially aesthetic decorum, but also social conventions. Blake touches upon this theme in his poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, etched in 1792, were he points out the inadequacy of orthodox Christian morality by shocking the reader. What is traditionally considered 'good' such as reason, restraint and prohibition, is not truly 'good' according to Blake, a combination of energy and reason is actually "necessary for Human existence" (Greenblatt 148). Written during the French Revolution there are some allusions to the shaping of a new society and the revolutionaries' attempt to create a new culture free from the corrupted past. What radicals, including the early socialists, tried to accomplish in politics, innovation, transformation and perfection, Blake tried to accomplish in poetry (Duff 26). The idea is phrased beautifully in this passage from the *Marriage*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (plate 14). In an earlier poem from All Religions are One, there is a universalism in Blake's thought, not unlike that of socialist internationalism, and it is depicted in his poem; "[A]s all men are alike in outward form, So (and/ with the same infinite variety)" (Plate 5).

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that Marxism and communism are, or claim to be, based on a scientific perspective and thus bear little resemblance to Romanticism. Socialist and communist regimes have generally preferred and promoted the aesthetics of social realism to other forms of art (Löwy and Sayre 29). However, it is not difficult to imagine how Blake's 'divine image' led people to believe in, and yearn for, a utopian society. Even today the socialist rebel and the utopian society remain very romantic concepts.

2.4 Anarchism – The Dissent of Shelley

In the wake of the French Revolution, British society entered a time of peace, but it was a peace so timid and hostile towards passionate emotion that only the most terrified conservatives could endure it (Russell 583), a Sir Edmund Creasy even proclaimed, in a debate reminiscent of our time, that the end of wasteful conflict was at hand and it had given way to economic competition (Shaw 49). However, the silence was soon broken by a new generation of Romantics. Among these new Romantics was Percy Bysshe Shelley who, more fervently than ever, voiced dissent and revolution through his poetry (Duff 4). Rather than being a poet who became political he was a political writer that became inspired by poetry. Shelley's radicalism went beyond that of his predecessors and throughout his career he kept scrutinizing the establishment and always spoke out against whatever he considered unjust in society (34-35). Whereas Coleridge and Wordsworth had their revolutionary enthusiasm tempered by the outcome of the revolution, Shelley remained determined to bring about change and this vehement passion found its way into his poetry. In the poem "Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte" (1816), Shelley describes the full extent of his contempt for the former Emperor Napoleon: "I hated thee, fallen tyrant! I did groan/ To think that a most ambitious slave,/ Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave/ Of Liberty" (1-4). Anarchism, derived from the Greek phrase *an archos*, meaning 'no rule' or 'no government' is arguably the best way to define Shelley's political inclination.

The background to British anarchism is intertwined with that of utopian socialism, based on the protestant, communal and egalitarian movement (Ball and Dagger 32-3). There is also the important influence of William Godwin and his *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) which was one of the responses to Burke's *Reflections*. Like many radicals of his time, Godwin had a strong belief in the progress of mankind and he demonstrated 'anti-statist' views that are usually interpreted as anarchistic, although Godwin never adopted the term 'anarchists' because of the negative connotations associated with the term. According to Godwin, the French Revolution was a precursor of things to come. Godwin believed that human progress and knowledge were continuously increasing and if only the corrupting influence of domestic oppression from social arrangements would end, then a free, democratic utopia would be possible (Duff 26-27). Of all the Romantic writers Shelley was arguably the one most influenced by Godwin's theories; he eventually married the daughter of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and in his poetry there are many references to Godwin's philosophy.

Shelley never adopted the unorthodox spirituality of Coleridge or the pantheism of Blake; indeed, Shelley was, even more, sceptical of organised religion and when he published a treatise on *The Necessity of Atheism* in 1811 he was expelled from the University of Oxford. Somewhat ironically, Shelley argued in *Necessity* that "… it is also evident that, as belief is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality is attachable to disbelief" (12-3). When Shelley began writing *Queen Mab* in 1811, English radicalism was at an all-time low and the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1790's had been replaced by British patriotism and even Whigs and liberals that sought reform spoke of the 'constitutional rights of Englishmen', rather than 'the Right of Man' (Duff 57). *Queen Mab* is often considered one of Shelley's most seditious poems and it is apparent that he tried to revive a revolutionary mood and, like Blake, keep alive the divine vision of a utopia to come.

In *Queen Mab*, the reader is shown visions of the past, present and future. The past and present are depicted as miserable because of the oppression, injustice and suffering caused by commerce, despotism and religion. Critics have argued that Shelley basically put Godwin's anarchist sentiment into verse (Duff 65-7): "Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,/ The signet of its all-enslaving power,/ Upon a shining ore, and called it gold;/ Before whose image bow the vulgar great,/ The vainly rich, the miserable proud,/ The mob of peasants, nobles, priests and kings" (v, 38-43). It might seem ignorant for the aristocratic Shelley to scorn people, especially the poor mob of peasants, for taking part in industry and trade, but we should perhaps remember Shelley's idealism and consider Godwin's conception of property in *Political Justice*: "There is nothing that more powerfully tends to distort our judgment and opinions, than erroneous notions concerning the goods of fortune" (vol. II, 788). With regards to this, Shelley's arguments appear not quite so crass: "The harmony and happiness of man/ Yields to the wealth of nations" (v, 79-80). "The weight that drags to earth his towering hopes,/ Blighting all prospect but of selfish gain,/ Withering all passion but of slavish fear,/ Extinguishing all free and generous love" (v, 83-6).

Shelley's fervent contempt for despots and tyrants is made apperent in *Queen Mab* and it is another trait that marks him as an anarchist: "Since tyrants by the sale of human life/ Heap luxuries to their sensualism, and fame/ To their wide-wasting and insatiate pride,/ Success has sanctioned to a credulous world/ The ruin, the disgrace, the woe of war" (v, 53-57). It was not merely autocracy he despised, but authority in general: "Power, like a desolating pestilence,/ Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience,/ Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,/ Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame" (iii, 176-179).

The third form of oppression Shelley addresses is religion, temperance and marriage in particular. In the future, Shelley hoped that such unnecessary restraints would wither away: "The kindred sympathies of human souls,/ Needed no fetters of tyrannic law./ Those delicate and timid impulses/ In Nature's primal modesty arose,/ And with undoubting confidence disclosed/ The growing longings of its dawning love,/ Unchecked by dull and selfish chastity" (ix, 76-81). Throughout his writing career, Shelley would advocate free love which is usually considered, during Shelley's lifetime at least, a rather libertine attitude. "Here now the human being stands adorning/ This loveliest earth with taintless body and mind;/ Blest from his birth with all bland impulses,/ Which gently in his noble bosom wake/ All kindly passions and all pure desires." (viii, 98-202).

While past and present were dismal, the future held great promise, or so Shelley thought: "Yet every heart contains perfection's germ./ The wisest of the sages of the earth,/ That ever from the stores of reason drew/ Science and truth, and virtue's dreadless tone" (canto V, 147-50). Here we find a typically Godwinian belief that a redeemed society can be achieved if only man becomes virtuous, which both Shelley and Godwin expects will happen: "Perfectibility is one of the most unequivocal characteristics of the human species, so that the political, as well as the intellectual state of man, may be presumed to be in a course of progressive improvement" Godwin describes it in *Political Justice* (vol. I, 11).

Sometimes Shelley commented on current events, which he does in *Mask of Anarchy*, a poem written 1819 on the occasion of the massacre at Manchester. Unlike the national victory that was Waterloo, Peterloo was a national shame as local militia and cavalry killed eleven protestors and wounded hundreds when they dispersed an unarmed crowd. The publication of the poem was postponed until 1832 for fear of being charged with libel (Greenblatt 779). The title of the poem is an allusion to the government using the term anarchy to stigmatise democratic reform, but Shelley turns it around on them implying that the government's policies in fact incite chaos: "We have waited weak and lone/ For thy coming, Mighty One!/ Our purses are empty, our swords are cold,/ Give us glory, and blood, and gold" (61-5), "Then all cried with one accord,/ 'Thou art King, and God, and Lord;/ Anarchy, to thee we bow,/ Be thy name made holy now!" (70-4). Further on, he describes the transgression of the soldiers: "And if then the tyrants dare/ Let them ride among you there,/ Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew, —/ What they like, that let them do" (340-4). Then Shelley ends the poem with defiance: 'Rise like Lions after slumber/ In unvanquishable number—/ Shake your chains to earth like dew/ Which in sleep had fallen on you—/ Ye are many—they are few" (368-372).

Modern day anarchism takes many forms, varying from right-wing libertarianism to anarcho-communism, but most of the attitudes found in Shelley's and Godwin's criticism remain the same today (Ball and Dagger 15-6). There is a significant difference between Shelley and Godwin about how to accomplish the anarchist utopia. Godwin argued that education and public opinion was the means of change, not direct action (104 Duff):

> The proper method for hastening the decay of error is not by brute force, or by regulation which is one of the classes of force, to endeavour to reduce men to intellectual uniformity; but on the contrary by teaching every man to think for himself. (vol. II, 843)

Because of this Godwin became the object of much ridicule, since he, despite promoting the most radical reform, was perfectly willing to live and even comply with a government he disagreed with completely. Shelley, on the other hand, was not deterred by the thought of violent uprisings, which is prevalent in most of Shelley's revolutionary work. This dispute continued as the idea of revolution remained a staple of anarchism and the ideology influenced the development of European thought and politics, especially in the late 19th to early 20th century, but, nowadays, few actually take direct action against the state (Ball and Dagger 16).

2.5 Nationalism – The Heroic Byron

Romanticism was especially significant for nationalism since the ideology places special emphasis on the attributes and qualities of different cultures, which the Romantic writers often aspired to be a part of. Nationalists perceive that people can be naturally divided into groups and nations (Ball and Dagger 14). Nationality is however not a person's choice, but rather something acquired at birth; nation derives from the Latin word *natus* meaning 'birth'. Nationalism became an exceptionally powerful force in the early 1800s, partly because of the Napoleonic Wars; the conquered countries, like Germany and Italy, agitated by the French occupation, felt either resentment, or perhaps even envy, towards the French Empire. Determining nationality has always been notoriously difficult, but nationalists tend to point out ethnicity, culture, language, religion, customs and history as important factors (15).

George Gordon Byron was one of many Romantic writers that subscribed to the nationalistic worldview, not British nationalism in particular, but nationalism in a wider sense; he thought that nations had a soul and claimed that people were not free unless they had a sovereign nation-state. He also assumed that race was important and that because people

shared common ancestry they had a sort of 'blood consciousness' (Russell 583). In one of his earliest poems, "On Leaving Newstead Abbey" (1803), he expresses pride for his crusader ancestors and aristocratic heritage: "That fame, and that memory, still will he cherish;/ He vows that he ne'er will disgrace your renown:/ Like you will he live, or like you will he perish;/ When decay'd, may he mingle his dust with your own!" (28-32). Although definitely an advocate of nationalism, Lord Byron's political thoughts are perhaps best reflected in the work of theorist Thomas Carlyle and, later, the German philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche. Carlyle's social commentary is a critique of his intellectual contemporaries that stressed liberal, democratic values and lay emphasis on the majority of ordinary men. Carlyle saw the new modern society as the source of conformity and mediocrity. In his own work, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, he would instead praise the 'hero'; irrespective of the fact whether he was a poet like Shakespeare, a priest like Luther or a conqueror like Napoleon. Carlyle was very much an autocrat:

> Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for that country; no ballot-box, parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit (262).

Byron shared Carlyle's admiration of Napoleon and took his death as 'a personal blow' (Shaw 48), his "Ode To Napoleon Buonaparte" (1814) is a mixture of great admiration and disappointment: "A lion in the conquering hour!/ In wild defeat a hare!/ Thy mind hath vanished with thy power,/ For Danger brought despair./ The dreams of sceptres now depart" (180-4). At the time of Byron's death, Carlyle considered him 'the noblest spirit in Europe'. Whereas most people of the time rebelled against oppression or injustice, the aristocratic rebel, which Byron was an exemple of, needed another cause for discontent. It may be a simple desire for power, but in his conscious thought he criticise the state of the world and promote his own self-assertion (Russell 638).

The 'Byronic hero' became a romantic concept based on the protagonists of stories like *Childe Harold*, *Manfred* and *Don Juan*, who in turn are often thought of as semi-autobiographical to Byron himself (Greenblatt 613). Usually, the hero is fiercely independent, cynical, rebellious and intelligent to the point of arrogance. However, he is haunted by his past and his behaviour tends to be self-destructive; this mysteriousness also gives him a seductive quality. In Byron's 'metaphysical drama' *Manfred* from 1816, the protagonist feels angst caused by regret and knowing what he might have become, but not being able to

achieve it: “Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most/ Must mourn the deepest o’er the fatal truth,/ The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.” (1.1.11-3). Unlike Goethe’s *Faust*, Manfred defies all authorities that tempt him with salvation and, in the end, after declaring his own free will, he perishes rather than surrendering. Nietzsche would in *Ecce Homo* (1908) recognise that Byron had anticipated his own ‘*Ubermensch’*, who asserts his own moral code and is beyond good and evil (Greenblatt 638).

Anti-Semitism was a vice often associated with early European nationalism and when Byron touched upon the subject of politics he sometimes exposed such prejudice, claiming that Jewish bankers abused economic control (Russell 584): “Who hold the balance of the World? Who reign/ O'er congress, whether royalist or liberal?/ Who rouse the shirtless patriots of Spain?/ (That make old Europe's journals "squeak and gibber" all)/ Who keep the World, both old and new, in pain/ Or pleasure? Who make politics run glibber all?/ The shade of Buonaparte's noble daring?-/ Jew Rothschild, and his fellow-Christian, Baring” (*Don Juan*, canto 12, 615-7).

Byron would later in his life turn his nationalist beliefs into action as he travelled to take part in the Greek War of Independence. The poem “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year” describes his experiences and emotions before he died of a feverish sickness: “Awake! (not Greece—she is awake!)/ Awake, my Spirit! Think through *whom*/ Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake/ And then strikes home!” (25-8); his contribution to the Greek cause earned him the status of a national hero (Greenblatt 616).

Byron was never an appreciated writer among his contemporaries in England; still his writing – and perhaps even more so his myth - was influential and his thoughts resonated better with the sentiments on the European continent (Russell 641). His political progenies are mostly found in revolutionary right-wing movements, ranging from the Italian Carbonari to the National Socialists in Germany. Today, after a century of World Wars and ethnic conflict, his readers are no longer so prone to embrace Byron’s revolutionary views. The nationalist ideology is still alive in Europe, but it is not the revolutionary sort Byron admired, but a more democratic, liberal kind of nationalism (Ball and Dagger 16). I think Byron, describing Rousseau in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), gives an appropriate depiction of himself: “The apostle of affliction, he who threw/ Enchantment over passion, and from woe/ Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew/ The breath which made him wretched; yet he knew/ How to make madness beautiful, and cast/ O’er erring deeds and thoughts a heavenly hue” (canto 3, 2-6).

3. Conclusion

Having shown the width of the spectrum of political thought within the British Romantic Movement, we can conclude that they were indeed a very diverse group of writers that were influenced by and, perhaps more importantly, affected the intellectual debate through their poetry. Romanticism, as a political ideology, is so difficult to determine with precision, because it can have many different meanings and it was a movement that could take various dimensions in different contexts. Yet, amidst all this discord the common denominator seems to be, not unexpectedly, their preference for strong sentiments. Although we can classify the Romantics according to modern political ideologies, and perhaps even relate to their political endeavours, Romanticism is definitely more suited for times of political upheaval and drastic change and we might consequently have some trouble understanding the discourse of the Romantic period. For better or worse, the Romantic Movement broke with the European tradition of rationality and reason, and the political impact of this was to bolster radical views, no matter what ideology they were based on. However, we can also recognise a noteworthy furtherance of individual liberty and creative freedom, which still resonates with us today.

I would like to mention that regarding ethical considerations it has not been my aim to promote one political ideology or another and I have hopefully depicted them in an objective manner, with a clear separation of my own personal views. Also, it has been my intention to portray the authors and their work in a fair and respectful way.

Further studies in this subject matter could involve a closer examination as to how Romanticism may, or may not, affect the political debate today and if there are similarities. In this aspect I have only scratched the surface. If more time was granted I might have looked at other ideologies like feminism, concerning female writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, or environmentalism, regarding the poets' strong link to nature, however, these subjects would have required their own kind of discourse, which I could not provide in this essay; which is why I selected the strictly political ideologies.

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